

Study Guide

***A Raisin in the Sun* by Lorraine Hansberry**

LEXILE 660

The Novel at a Glance**MORE ABOUT THE WRITER**

Lorraine Hansberry (1930–1965) was the youngest of four children. Her parents were prominent intellectuals, and in their South Side Chicago home, Hansberry met some of the greatest African Americans of their generation, including the poet Langston Hughes, the musician-composer Duke Ellington, the athletes Joe Louis and Jesse Owens, the actor-singer-activist Paul Robeson, and the writer-civil-rights-leader W.E.B. Du Bois.

Hansberry's parents had experience in politics and activism. In 1938 Carl Hansberry challenged the segregated housing pattern in Chicago when he purchased a house in an all-white neighborhood. The family was threatened by a white mob and forced to leave by a court order. Hansberry took the case to the Supreme Court (*Hansberry v. Lee*) where he won a favorable judgment.

Despite the victory, the experience left him disillusioned and bitter, and these feelings resonate throughout *A Raisin in the Sun*, which Lorraine Hansberry completed in 1957. Her dramatization of one family's struggle to make a place for themselves in an unfair, even hostile world attracted a great deal of attention when it became the first play by an African American woman to be produced on Broadway. The play's premiere, in 1959, was a cultural event, giving voice to a generation ready to be heard. Hansberry dramatized the dreams and disappointments of African Americans in general, but she also depicted an ordinary family whose struggles, conflicts, and triumphs all people could recognize. *A Raisin in the Sun* won the New York Drama Critics Circle Award that year, a first for any African American playwright. The play crossed social lines with a powerful grace, appealing to critics, activists, and artists, as well as theatergoers.

Although her life and career were cut short by an early death, Lorraine Hansberry left behind an important legacy. Before she turned to drama, she worked on Paul Robeson's progressive magazine, *Freedom*, as a writer and editor. And in addition to *A Raisin in the Sun*, she wrote several other plays, including *The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window* and *Les Blancs*. Much of her work was collected and arranged in "an informal autobiography" by her ex-husband, Robert Nemiroff. The result, *To Be Young, Gifted and Black*, is a tribute to Hansberry's literary, social, and personal vision.

BACKGROUND

The play is set in the 1950s, a time when the civil rights movement was just beginning to gain momentum. Hansberry's characters echo trends of that time, with Lena—like Rosa Parks—making the powerful decision to push back against a society that views her as less than equal. Although African Americans were barred from living in certain neighborhoods, sitting in certain bus seats, and working in some professions at the time, more and more people refused to comply with these unjust restrictions, paving the way toward equality for all.

A Raisin in the Sun *continued*

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Lena Younger (Mama) is a recent widow, and years of hard work are catching up with her. She worries about her family and wrestles with decisions about the insurance money. She dearly wants to give more responsibility to her son. One of the joys at the end of the play comes when he proves himself worthy of her trust.

Walter Lee Younger, Mama's thirty-five-year-old son, works as a chauffeur but dreams of owning his own business. So strong is this dream that he neglects his marriage, drinks to excess, and betrays Mama's trust by treating her money carelessly. His redemption at the play's climax is so powerful because his mistakes have been so devastating.

Ruth Younger is Walter's wife and the mother of their son, **Travis**. She is desperate to see her family in a home of their own. Ruth is torn between her disgust with Walter's present behavior and her love for the man he once was.

Beneatha Younger, Mama's college-age daughter, dreams of becoming a doctor but pursues other interests as well. She is attracted to both **George Murchison**, the son of a wealthy businessman, and **Joseph Asagai**, a politically active student from Nigeria. As her family's conflicts play out, Beneatha must reexamine her own heart.

VOCABULARY DEVELOPMENT

A single idea can be expressed in many ways. In this play, for example, Mama recalls being called "a *high-minded* thing," and Walter later says "we are a very proud people." Explain the **shades of meaning** in these two expressions, share the connotations—associated meanings and emotions—of each. Authors choose words carefully to evoke the most fitting connotations.

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